

**It Takes A Village Working Together:
The story of Reverend Demitris Gonzalez –**

Written by CMPD Animal Control Officer K. Caffray

About a year ago, I met a homeless woman named Ms. Demitris Gonzalez, who was living in the woods near an automobile Dealership in the University area of Charlotte, NC with her three dogs. The dealership had allowed her to use a broken maintenance van to stay in for a few days. After her stay in the van, she needed somewhere to go. After speaking with Ms. Gonzalez, I found out that she is legally blind. She had an accident when she was younger that altered her sight and left her with 10% vision in one eye, and about 30% in the other. Since then, Ms. Gonzalez has run into several obstacles that have set her back. She has had to learn how to live without being able to see. She carries a blind stick and was successful in registering her three dogs as "Seeing eye dogs" when she was living in South Florida.

Just before I met Ms. Gonzalez, she received news that her older sister, Helen (Elena), had suffered a heart attack and was being admitted into a hospital here in Charlotte. Ms. Gonzalez dropped everything in Florida to move to Charlotte to be by her sister's side. She hired a UHAUL driver, and brought herself, her canines and her belongings to the Queen City. Ms. Gonzalez had nowhere to go, which led her to a campsite in the woods.

I gave Ms. Gonzalez my personal phone number and advised her that I would be in contact with her to help her as much as possible. Ms. Gonzalez was moved by a family member and the police to a parking lot behind a shopping center In East Charlotte. At this point in time, she still had not found her sister to make a visit.

I started making several visits to Ms. Gonzalez on my off time, to charge her phone, bring her groceries, and do some of her laundry for her. While on Duty, I brought her dog food, water and other pet supplies that we had a surplus of. Ms. Gonzalez was quite uncomfortable and scared in this area of town, which led to several police calls and complaints. Shortly after, I was able to do some research and locate her sister Elena in The Mecklenburg Rehabilitation Center. My co-worker Officer R. Rogers and I put her up in a hotel for two nights and transported Ms. Gonzalez, her canines and her belongings to the hotel and showed her how to get around. Ms. Gonzalez was able to shower and get a comfortable night's sleep before we took her to the Rehab Center to see her sister. Ms. Gonzalez was relieved and very grateful to have to opportunity to visit her ill sister.





Ms. Gonzalez then moved to an area in the woods within walking distance from the Rehab Center. She walked to visit her sister every day. The next step in this journey was to bring Ms. Gonzalez to the Social Security office so that she could receive social security checks. Once she was receiving payment, I took her to the Housing Authority to set up a section 8 voucher. We acquired a voucher with a very short expiration date. Due to the house-hunting taking a while, we had to make multiple visits back to the housing authority to renew these vouchers.

I started to reach out for help from various organizations such as [Urban Ministries](#), [Steele Creek Church](#), and [Hearts to Hands Nonprofit](#). Ms. Gonzalez was assigned a social worker, Carmen, through Urban Ministries to help her with paperwork and transportation. Steele Creek Church got involved and helped her with necessities such as bathing, food, and laundry. Lastly, Hearts to Hands provided a New, bigger tent, groceries and toiletry items. In addition, **Officer C. Perry** and **Officer S. Davis** have helped with fixing Ms. Gonzalez's tent through storms and by delivering dog food.

Ms. Gonzalez's campsite was located conveniently next to a vet, [Carolina Vet Specialists](#), and a dog boarding facility, [Continental Boarding](#). Together, these companies have supplied Ms. Gonzalez's canines with current vaccines, flea/tick prevention, dog houses, and emergency vet care.

After a very demanding 9 months, we found Ms. Gonzalez a house. With help from members of the church, **Officer B. Fink** and I moved Ms. Gonzalez and her belongings to her new home. Elena's health had improved, and she was released from the Rehab Center. The sisters now live together with their three service dogs in a lovely home in Charlotte.

Now that she is in a stable home, I have been working on getting her in compliance with all Animal Care and Control ordinances. All three dogs (Kaage, Kaito, Kaila) are secured on cable tethers in the back yard with access to food, water and shelter; however, the canines have broken free and managed to escape the property. This creates a huge danger to Ms. Gonzalez, as she goes to search for the dogs, and can't find her way back home.



Currently, Ms. Gonzalez's yard is almost completely fenced in, with chain-link fence on three sides. The fourth side is not fenced. I found a nonprofit organization called [United for Animals](#), who are willing and ready to build Ms. Gonzalez the gate that she needs to complete her backyard fencing. With the fence, all three dogs will be secure.

Most recently, she received a washer and dryer donation from Steel Creek Church. Lawn care and transportation are still a work in progress as well as health care for both ladies. I have been able to get Ms. Gonzalez to the cardiologist and back on prescription medication that she has been living without since her move. My hope is to get Ms. Gonzalez and her sister all the resources they need to live as self-sufficient as possible given their disabilities.

As this journey continues, I will remain a friend and emergency contact for the Gonzalez Sisters.

-Officer K. Caffray

Officer Caffray sets an excellent example for the direction that animal shelters and animal control officers are moving in. Over the years she and fellow officers have become keenly aware that helping the person and the pet and finding solutions to keep the person and pet together is the best possible outcome for everyone.

In the past two weeks, a national organization, [Human Animal Support Services \(H.A.S.S\)](#) rolled out a program model that supports these types of animal services, where people and their animals are the focus. Community partners work together to help, which is exactly what happened with Ms. Gonzales. The village came together, and everyone played a role. Animal Care & Control is happy and excited to have been selected to be a pilot shelter in this new, exciting program. This will provide an even better way AC&C to continue to help people and their pets in our community.



Officer Caffray and 9 other officers will now form our new team of H.A.S.S. officers and be dedicating most of their time working cases that will focus on keeping families and pets together.

When Officer Caffray was asked what it means to her to help with these situations she said, "Everyone deserves to have a loving companion. The happiness I feel when I help a pet parent keep their best friend, especially through tough times, is undefinable. With additional funding, I truly believe that Animal Care & Control can deliver more to the community, providing a safer and more trusting relationship between officers and the pet owners in Charlotte-Mecklenburg."

If you would like to help keep pets in our community with their families, especially during the ever-changing times we are currently in, please consider [donating to this program](#).